

#22 Baldy – the rear, Firebase Bong Son, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – None

I was getting tired. It had been a hard day, what with stealing the jeep and going AWOL with the guys. A hot shower, a change of clothes, and maybe an afternoon siesta sounded real good to me. Having contacts in the rear would make things easy. My first stop was the supply tent.

Staff Sergeant Scott was not out front when I entered the tent. I walked around the counter and headed to the rear of the tent where his cubby hole was located. He was not there either. I exited the back of the tent and entered the tent immediately in back of it. There was plenty of activity taking place, and SSgt. Scott was in the middle of it.

"Hey, Professor," Jim said upon looking up from his clipboard. "I'm glad you stopped by. Be with you in a minute. Why don't you plant your ass at my desk and take a load off." Smiling, I turned and headed back to his cubby hole.

Jim's desk was covered with paperwork. There was a clothes rack next to the desk. I leaned my M-16 against it and took off my webbing, hanging it carefully from the rack. Putting my steel pot on top of his desk, I took a seat in the chair next to the desk and put up my feet. Taking out a cigarette, I lit it and began exercising my lungs. Hanging out with Sergeant Scott had been a habit during my time in the rear. Being back in his cubby hole seemed so familiar and peaceful.

"You bring back the jeep when you returned?" Jim asked upon entering the tent.

"Sure enough did," I replied.

"Good. Why didn't you just ask for one? Don't you know I would have signed it out to you?"

"Yeah. I thought about it, Sarge. Seeing as how I was going to be taking it off base without permission, I thought it best you did not get involved."

"Shit. I would have gone with you."

"Yeah. I thought of that too. I apologize but it was a very private party."

"Apology accepted. I know when I was in the infantry I was very close to the guys I served with. Had some very private parties myself in those days. I guess I miss that more than anything. What you need, Pro?"

"A shower and a change of clothes would suit me just fine."

"Done." Jim left for a couple minutes, returning with a new uniform, socks, and underwear. He handed the clothes over to me.

"Here, I don't need these," I said, holding out the underwear.

Jim laughed, "I'm just trying to get rid of them. I tried to order just fatigue jackets, socks, and trousers for the men, knowing that no one wears underwear out in the jungle. Can't do it. The Army says a new issue of clothes includes underwear. Anyway, you can not blame me for trying."

I smiled. Just another example of Army Think. Someone decided what was proper, and that was the way things were to be handled come hell or high water. The clothing would probably wind up being stolen by the Vietnamese, and in a month or two old Charlie would be seen wearing puke green Army underwear.

"Shower's in the same place it was in Pleiku. There's not much of a line. We're bringing the men from your company into the area a few at a time so we can process them quickly. Leave all your stuff here. I'll lock your weapon away until you get back."

Thanking Jim, I left the supply tent and headed over to the showers. Sure enough there were only about six guys waiting in line for a shower. I got in the back of the line.

Private Ashby from Third Platoon turned as I took my place in line.

"Hey, Sarge, you can get in front of me if you want."

"Naw. I'll wait. What's going on?"

It was sort of a rhetorical question. Just passing time.

"I hear we have to get a haircut after we are done showering."

"Good," I said smiling. I had been hoping to get one while in the rear. In the picture we had taken while in town, the guys in the platoon were beginning to look like a bunch of hippies. I had really noticed it about a week ago, when a couple of squads from Fourth Platoon were passing through the perimeter on their way to set up an ambush. As they moved through some armpit-high elephant grass, you could just see their heads bobbing along, as if disembodied. A few of the men had their helmets off, and you could see their hair blowing in the wind.

After spending three months in the field, everyone's hair was much longer than the military would normally allow. Seeing their hair blowing in the wind, my mind flashed upon the image of a lion's mane. It is exactly what they looked like. A pride of young lions embarking on a hunt. I found the image stirring. It made me feel proud of who I was and what I was doing. Then again, I am probably crazy.

Anyway, it would be good to get my hair cut. Maybe everyone would have an opportunity.

I was second in line for the shower when a new batch of men showed up and got in line.

"Hey, Sergeant Merrins," a voice yelled out.

I recognized it as Johnny Norr's voice. He was standing near the end of the line. I did not particularly like Johnny. He had a shady side to him. There were rumors about him and drugs, although I was not clear how they were supposedly related. We went back a long way together, since he was one of the few surviving original members of the company. There seemed to be fewer and fewer of us each day, although I was not certain what had happened to all those who were no longer with us. I left my spot in line and walked back to join Johnny.

"You hear about the haircuts, Sarge?"

"I hear we're supposed to get one after showering."

"You know why?"

"I suppose it's because our hair is getting sort of long, and the Old Man is tired of us looking like a troop of girl scouts."

This bought a few laughs from the guys standing around us in line. It had struck me funny up until then that the men in line were quieter than I would have expected. They were way too grim for guys getting an opportunity to relax in the rear for a change.

"Well the word is that it isn't the Old Man who ordered us to get haircuts. Supposedly the leg general in charge of this base saw our men and called Battalion demanding that all the men get haircuts. He supposedly said something about us being sorry excuses for Army men."

I bit my tongue, forcing myself to remain cool. A fucking REMF, leg general, saying that about the men in my company was almost more than I could take. Motherfucker! Only in the military. I smiled.

"I didn't hear anything like that until now. I was sort of looking forward to getting a haircut. It's way too hot to be wearing our hair down to our assholes. If we don't get haircuts now, by time we get to the rear again, the birds will be making nests in our hair."

Johnny laughed. "Yeah, I suppose you're right."

"Who you hear that from anyway?"

"One of the guys who came back to the bunker. We were having some fun with him. He was acting all pissed about losing his hair. Maybe he was just making it up." I hoped so.

Finally it was my turn to enter the tent. Inside was a private whose job it was to collect all the old, dirty uniforms we were wearing. I do not know what they were planning to do with them. The only thing they would be good for was building a bonfire, and even then you would want to be upwind of the fumes.

The shower itself was all too short. Even three or four hours in a shower would have been too short. It felt so good just to feel clean again. In the field, we would bath in a stream almost every day, but no one used soap or shampoo. Sergeant Scott had made sure there was plenty of both available for the men. The deeds of a good supply sergeant went mostly unnoticed and unappreciated, but it made each man's little time in the shower that much more valuable. I had my clean change of clothing with me and so was able to put on fresh clothes right out of the shower.

The other guys were just as lucky. Once again SSgt. Scott had thought of everybody. Just outside the back of the shower tent, some men had set up for business. They had strung a canvas covering to provide shade for the men and had laid down some wood flooring. There were boxes of various size uniforms. As each man exited, he told the men his size number and within seconds was issued a new set of fatigues, minus the underwear of course. Then each man was also issued a new set of jungle boots. The old ones, which had definitely seen better days, were being boxed, for what I could only guess.

Once we were dressed, another soldier pointed the way to another tent. Upon entering, it was easy to see that it had been set up as the local barber shop. Only it wasn't. From my experience in the rear, I knew that the base would have many nicely set up barber shops for the men who were stationed in the rear. It was one of the things that was a pain in the ass about being stationed in the rear. You were expected to maintain your dress and deportment very closely to the standards that were required stateside. Of course the guys in the rear had Vietnamese maids to help them maintain these standards. While it was required that you keep your hair trimmed, you were allowed to wear it fairly long, as long as it was neat. A decent haircut cost all of fifty cents.

I entered the tent and knew that what Johnny Norr had heard was true. There were six chairs, and by each one was a GI with a pair of clippers. What they were doing in this barbershop was similar to what they did to new recruits during their first days in service. It was not so much giving haircuts, as shearing the men as if they were sheep.

There were a couple of MPs standing around with M-16 rifles. There was a colonel standing next to one side of the tent, and next to him were our platoon leaders. They all had fresh haircuts, but nothing like the ones the men were receiving. Top was there also, forced I was sure, to lend his presence. As soon as he spotted me, he came over to where I was standing. This got the attention of all the officers present.

"Lou, you don't need to go through this."

"Yeah, Top. I do." I was not mad at him or the lieutenants. They were lifers, and their careers were on the line. I wasn't. I walked over to an empty chair. As I approached, the man standing there with the clippers smiled self-consciously. I stared into his eyes, letting him know that I did not give a shit how uncomfortable he felt. His eyes dropped to the ground. I sat down and he whipped a sheet over my body and around my neck. I grabbed a corner. A quick pull and it slid to the ground.

"Leave it."

Without a word the man quickly cut my hair off. It gave me an opportunity to watch the proceedings. Our three lieutenants stood there looking foolish. I really felt sorry for them. Some of the men would blame them for participating in this little fiasco. Most would understand, but some wouldn't be willing to forget. Top just acted as he normally would. As an NCO, no one would blame him. He was popular with the men, and they accepted his presence for what it was. The colonel was looking decidedly uncomfortable. He probably knew that every man in the place was staring at his face, much like I was, memorizing it. This man probably had nothing to do with issuing the orders. It was his job to see that the orders were carried out. Any of the men getting their heads shaved would have gladly slit his throat in an instant. I wondered how it felt, to be stared at like that by men the military had trained to kill.

As each man got up, he walked to the exit, looking neither left nor right. His body language was entirely different from recruits who had been newly shorn. His whole demeanor said Do Not Fuck With Me. Not one man acknowledged the presence of a senior officer, neither saluting nor addressing him. The colonel did not seem inclined to make an issue of the matter.

I got up from the chair and stared over to where the other platoon leaders were standing. I rubbed my hand through my hair and smiled. It actually felt good. I then turned and strode out like the other men.

I hurried over to the supply tent.

SSgt. Scott was sitting at his desk. He smiled at me when I entered the tent. "Sorry about the haircut, Lou."

"No sweat, Jim. Feels good. You did a good job setting up the shower and new uniform distribution. Having shampoo and soap was great. How long they have the barber shop set up?"

"About an hour. A couple of trucks showed up with the colonel and they commandeered the tent. Major Brown was with them. He seemed angry. I don't think he was the least bit happy, having a leg outfit set up camp in the battalion area."

"Good for him," I said. "Let me grab my stuff and get out of here. I got a sneaking suspicion my services are needed back at the company area."

"You think there will be any problems over this?"

I laughed. "Remember Pleiku?"

SSgt. Scott laughed. "Yeah. It was a while before some of those NCOs from the Fourth Infantry would talk with the rest of us. They considered the burning of their club an insult. It was almost three days before we were drinking with them again."

"Well, I can only hope that things do not get too out of hand. The men will not take this lying down. I know that, and you know that. Whatever they do, it will be interesting."

I grabbed my webbing and put it on. My bandoleers of M-16 ammo were slung around my neck. Picking up my weapon, I slid the bolt back and inspected the chamber to ensure it was empty. Releasing the catch, I allowed the bolt to slide forward into place. I shut the dust cover for the bolt and seated an ammo clip into the magazine. Shifting my shoulders seated the webbing comfortably. It felt good to be back in harness with a weapon in my hands. I picked up my steel pot and flipped it onto my head. It slid down onto my ears. Taking it off, I adjusted the leather band inside the helmet liner. I put the helmet back on more gently this time, making sure the fit was right. Evidently they had taken off enough hair to change my head size.

SSgt. Scott was watching with a smile on his face. "Take care of yourself, Pro. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." We shook hands, and I took off.

Five minutes later I was walking along the shoulder of the perimeter road trying to figure out what revenge the men would be thinking up. The whole Third Battalion was a feisty bunch. Before shipping out, they had run the motorcycle gangs that hung out in town right out of Fayetteville, North Carolina. On our stopover at Subic Bay, in the Philippines, they had caused riots and fights all over the naval base. Then there was the small incident of burning down the enlisted men's and NCO clubs at Pleiku.

It was not a case of the guys being exceptionally violent or criminal. When they needed to express themselves, oratory was not their cup of tea. These men would bitch and moan all day amongst themselves, but would say nothing to someone outside their group. Instead, when the situation called for it, they would send a message in some other form that would not be easy to misinterpret.

I was anxious to get back, not to try to avert any misbehavior, but to lend my support. It would be up to the other men to decide what to do. I would simply live with their decision. Besides, I had

gotten in enough trouble of my own for one day. It was my sincere desire that they would all decide to take naps before starting any shit.

A jeep pulled over to the side of the road right in front of me. The passenger hopped out, turning toward me.

"Airborne, Sir," I said, saluting.

The lieutenant returned my salute. "Hop in. We'll give you a lift."

"No thank you, Sir," I replied. "My position is just over that rise," I lied, pointing to a position not more than a hundred meters away.

"All right," he said. He got back in his jeep and headed on down the road.

It was still a good mile to the company's position. The last thing I wanted was to be spotted riding in a jeep with some leg officer. Right now leg officers might be high on the men's list of targets. Not that I thought the men would attack anyone, certainly not shoot at anyone.

Fifteen minutes later, I topped a small rise in the road. My uniform was soaked with sweat from walking in the hot midday sun. I was thirsty and dehydrated from the walk, but also from having drunk too much alcohol earlier in the day. Other than that I felt fine. There were two jeeps and a truck parked on the side of the road at the bottom of the hill. A man was talking into a radio. There was a driver sitting behind the wheel of the truck, his head leaning back, his eyes shut.

Three men stood around between the two jeeps. As I approached, it was easy to spot the MP insignias on their shoulders. Off toward the perimeter sat a series of bunkers. Each bunker had at least two men sitting on top, and they all seemed to be cleaning their weapons. I walked down the hill toward the vehicles.

My rifle was slung over my shoulder as I approached. The man talking on the radio turned in my direction. I saluted and kept moving. The bunkers off to the right were occupied by men from the Fourth Platoon, so whatever was happening here was none of my business.

"Hold it right there, soldier," the lieutenant said. "I thought you said your position was located back up the road a ways."

"My mistake, Sir. I'm just a visitor here. It's a big base. I guess I was confused."

"This your unit?" he said pointing toward the bunkers.

"Yes, Sir."

"Well maybe you can help me. I was sent down here to see what was holding up progress in moving these men back to their battalion area. They are supposed to get new uniforms and haircuts.

When I got here, the driver of the truck said the men on the bunkers were refusing to go. I just got off the horn to my CO. He wants me to go over to the bunker and order the men into the jeep.

When the MPs approached one of the bunkers earlier, one of the men shot a couple of rounds into the air. Now they want an MP officer present before they approach the bunkers again. I don't suppose you could go down there and talk to those men?"

"No, Sir. Those guys are from Fourth Platoon. They are a group of crazy motherfuckers. The guys in my platoon are even afraid of them. You want to go down there and talk with them, you go right ahead. I'm heading down the road to First Platoon, if it is alright with you, Sir."

I could tell he was unsure what to do. If he was scared, I did not blame him. "Are the guys in First Platoon more likely to listen to me?"

"No, Sir," I replied looking him directly in the eyes. "The guys in the First Platoon are crazier than the men Fourth Platoon. Even I am afraid of them." I smiled, confusing him all the more. The sound of an approaching jeep got my attention.

There were three men in the jeep: Captain Carlson, Master Sergeant Heard, and one of the drivers from Battalion. As soon as the jeep stopped, Captain Carlson and Master Sergeant Heard joined the lieutenant and me. It took the lieutenant all of two minutes to explain the situation.

The captain turned his eyes to me.

"Don't look at me, Sir. I just got here." Thank God the lieutenant was willing to back me up on that; otherwise the captain would have taken his frustration out on me. This man had led the company for several months and had come to expect the men to follow his commands without a second's hesitation. He was having trouble interpreting our actions in the rear when compared to our actions in the field.

"I want eight men from the First Platoon in that truck in the next five minutes or it's your ass, Sergeant," the captain said to me.

"Yes, Sir, Airborne!" I said, smiling. I saluted, did an about face and ran over to the truck. I opened the passenger door, waking the driver in the process.

"Get this thing turned around. I need to get to First Platoon right now." It took all of two minutes to drive down the road to the bunkers occupied by the platoon. My feet were no sooner on the ground than when Bobby hailed me.

"Sergeant Merrins, over here."

The jeep carrying the captain and Top pulled up behind the truck. They just sat there, waiting.

"I want all the squad leaders here right now," I said. All the men had come out of their bunkers and were drifting over to where I was standing. Within a minute all the men in the platoon were assembled.

"Sergeant Fry, Sergeant Baskins, Sergeant Fisher, Sergeant Kirby, Spec Four Wilburn, Private Hailey, I want all of you on that truck, right now. No weapons, no ammunition. I need two volunteers to accompany them."

"Yo, Sarge I'll go," said Spec Four Willis.

"I'm in," said Spec Four Clay.

A minute later all eight men were on board the truck, heading back down the road for a shower, new uniforms and a haircut. I was grateful the men had not given me any shit in front of the captain and Top. After the truck disappeared over the hill, followed by the captain's jeep, I turned and faced the other men who were assembled around me. I flipped off my helmet showing off my practically bald head.

"Shit Sarge, we had heard they were giving haircuts, but what the fuck they using to do it?" asked "Tex" Boyd.

"Legs," I replied.

"Fuck that."

"Motherfucker!"

"Them bastards." And so the discussion went for several minutes.

"You going to make us get haircuts, Sarge?"

"Not me. Some asshole leg general is making us get haircuts. I am going to make all of you get on the truck and go to Battalion. After that, it is up to you. I would rather that you all not embarrass the old man. He's a good officer, and I think we owe him our loyalty, but that's just my opinion. Now I suspect that the truck will be back here in about twenty minutes or so. First squad, followed by second squad and so on, just like we move. Eight men at a time until everyone gets his shower and new uniform. Questions?"

"What if we refuse?" asked PFC Martinez.

"You can refuse to get the haircut if you want. It's up to you. You refuse to get on the fucking truck then it's between you and me. I got my orders. You have yours." I delivered these remarks in a quiet voice, my eyes scanning the men present.

It was an unusual situation. In the field I let the squad leaders handle their squads. I spent time each day talking to all the men in the platoon, but these men were use to getting their orders directly

from their squad leaders. It was also unusual to have all the men together in one place. A large collection of men was a sure invitation for mortars if there were any in the area.

"Ain't no fucking leg cutting my hair," said Buddy Heatherington.

"No fucking way," said Hare.

I stood there not saying anything. I agreed with the men but did not have any suggestions for them. It was a tense moment.

All the men carried their weapons. They could chose to vote with them anytime they felt like it. None of the men had ever refused an order, but there was a first time for everything. It was something I had always dreaded. Issuing an order and the men choosing not to listen. I had always promised myself that when that day came, I would no longer lead. Maybe that is a coward's way out, but any man who does not command enough respect from the men he leads has no business trying to lead them. Leadership is not bestowed by an act of congress. Here in Vietnam, it was earned each and every day.

"Hey, Hare. Why don't you cut my hair? Buddy said.

Without a word, they both turned and headed for the bunker they shared. The idea spread like electricity through water. All the men dispersed and left me standing there. I walked over to where I had stored my rucksack.

"Sergeant Fry moved your equipment, Sarge." PFC Martinez said. "Put it over there, in the second bunker down. All the squad leaders moved into the same bunker."

I turned and walked over to the bunker. All the occupants were gone, since I had chosen them to go first. None of their weapons were present. They had all handed them over to men in their own squads prior to getting into the truck. The platoon radio sat on top of the bunker, the volume turned all the way up so that anyone within thirty yards would hear anything coming over the airwaves.

I still had the pictures I had bought in town earlier that day with military script. They were safely packed in their envelope. The first thing I did was put the envelope away in the bottom of the rucksack, not wanting anyone to see them. I grabbed my cleaning gear from my rucksack and climbed up on top of the bunker. I took the ever present towel from around my neck and spread it out on the roof. It was wet from perspiration, but so what. Within seconds I broke down my weapon and began cleaning it meticulously.

I knew we were scheduled to get new weapons in a day. If I did not bother cleaning it now, one would care. No one but me. Each piece had been cleaned hundreds of times in the past. The feel of each piece was as familiar to me as the nose on my face. This inanimate object meant as much to me as an arm or a leg, and the thought of giving it up was difficult to accept.

Such feelings for a piece of equipment were perverse, yet it saddened me that tomorrow the Army would begin the process of discarding it. I did not know its fate exactly. It would probably be refinished and shipped stateside. There it would be given to some recruit in basic training who was just learning to shoot. It would be a sad way to end its career. This weapon was meant for killing. It had served its purpose well, never having failed me in combat. That was all a soldier could ask from his weapon. I had taken care of it, and it had taken care of me. For the past two months it had never been more than a few inches from my hand, except for this morning while I had showered.

A rebel yell split the air and gained my attention. Two bunkers down, PFC Mayes threw back his head and let out another powerful yell. He was holding a handful of hair in one hand and a bayonet in the other. Lonely began dancing around on top of the bunker like some Indian with a fresh scalp in his hand. I laughed along with the other men.

Looking along the line of bunkers, I saw men giving each other haircuts. Not the standard military cut. Most of the men did not have scissors. On one of the first squad bunkers, Doc Daniels was using his scissors to cut handfuls of hair off PFC Miller's head.

Sitting on the same bunker were the Hare and Buddy. They were using their bayonets to cut each other's hair. Everyone in the platoon carried some kind of knife. Whether a bayonet or a survival knife, each had one thing in common: it was razor sharp. We used them for cutting branches, whittling, playing with, and opening letters. I often slept with mine in my left hand.

A knife gave one the feeling of comfort laying in the jungle at night when it was so dark you could not see the nose on your face. They were also extremely dangerous, and several of the men had cut themselves farting around with them. Now they served as scissors. The Hare grabbed a handful of Buddy's hair and carefully ran the blade of his bayonet close to the scalp. He did not have to saw with the knife, the hair splitting at the gentlest touch of the blade. Then it was Buddy's turn. I wondered whether they would be done before the truck arrived.

Looking around, I could see that everyone had decided they needed a haircut. I looked over to Lonely's position to see if he was done dancing. He was. Now he was sitting, and it looked like his hair had turned suddenly white. It took me a minute to figure out that it was shaving cream he had on top of his head. Sure enough, PFC Martin kneeled down in back of Lonely and proceeded to shave his head.

Monkey see, monkey do. All the men managed to get most of their hair cut down into a semblance of a haircut. Some were more successful than others. Now watching Lonely become bald, they discovered the means of achieving unit integrity and identity. It may have been the smartest thing Lonely ever did. An act of pure genius that pulled all the men together.

Everyone had razors. Despite being in the jungle for months, it was the one thing everyone did almost every day. Most days we dry shaved, unwilling to spare drinking water for the purpose of looking beautiful. I, like many of men in the company, did not have to shave daily. Some, like Bobby Fry, did not have to shave at all. Anyway, there was a plethora of razors available, and everyone got busy. Some of the macho men using their knives for this purpose.

I got down off the bunker and got my razor. I walked over to the nearest bunker where Spec Four Hanks and Reilly were working on each other. Hanks did a better job on Reilly than Reilly did on Hanks, resulting in Hanks having several razor cuts. The cuts were all bleeding, some more freely than others. Hanks just let the blood flow without bothering to try and stop it. Soon he was looking like the victim of an artillery attack. It was a great look.

When they were done, I asked Hanks to do my head. It is a strange feeling, having someone move a razor over your head. As the hair disappears, the skull becomes a sensitive organ that can read wind direction very accurately. Hanks was fast, and within five minutes I was bald. I felt a trickle along my neck and reached back expecting my hand to come away bloody. Sometimes you hope to be disappointed, and this time I was, my hand coming away wet but clean. The sun was high overhead, and my scalp was sweating.

Some men look good bald. Looking around I could see that this was more the exception than the rule. What had been a collection of ordinary men was now one ugly group. The white guys in the group came out the worst. I mean, their scalps were white, white. I mean white, like bleached bones. And most of them looked ugly bald. I made a decision right then and there not to look in the mirror for at least a month. If being bald made me look even half as ugly as some of the other men, I would just have to shoot myself.

"Truck's coming," someone yelled from up the line of bunkers.

Sure enough, not only the truck but the jeep with the first sergeant and captain aboard. The guys had decided amongst themselves who would go next. Actually, if given a choice they all would have gone. What had been a perceived affront to their dignity, they had turned around in their minds.. Fuck the General. If he wanted the men's hair short, then by God he would get short hair.

The look on both the captain's and MSgt. Heard's faces made the shave worthwhile. Both men broke out laughing. The men joined in. It had been the perfect reaction to the situation. The men knew they had done well and that the captain approved of their decision. Now the mood was festive. What might have turned into an ugly confrontation instead turned into a celebration of sorts.

The truck was quickly loaded, and it took off down the road. I walked quickly over to my bunker and retrieved my helmet, once again having to adjust the lining straps so it would fit my head. This was not to hide my condition; I had noticed some of the men's heads were already pink from the sun. In the tropics, it was possible to get second degree burns from the sun in a matter of minutes, especially if the skin was not used to the sun's intensity. My scalp would be very sensitive to the ultraviolet rays. I was tempted to warn everyone, but I wasn't their mother.

My squad leaders rejoined me when the next truck arrived to pick up more men. They all jumped down off the back of the truck and headed for the bunker. They were laughing and obviously in a good mood.

"You should have been there, Sarge," Bobby said, smiling.

"We were all been sheared and waiting for the truck. The colonel had stepped outside the tent and was smoking a cigarette when the truck turned into the battalion area. As soon as one of the guys from Battalion saw the men in the truck, word spread like wildfire. By time the truck stopped there must have been fifty guys standing outside the tents gawking. Suddenly everyone was cheering and laughing. The leg colonel looked like he had been hit in the face with a mortar. He threw down his cigarette and stalked into the tent," Sgt. Baskins said, laughing.

"Fifteen minutes later those legs were loaded on trucks and heading out of the area. We could see the colonel talking to Major Brown. Looked serious until the colonel walked away. Brown had this big smile on his face when his back was to the colonel. Didn't say a word to us or the men in the truck," Sgt. Kirby said.

"Whose idea was it anyway, Sarge?" Wilburn asked.

"Fucking Lonely," I replied.

"We decided we are going to do the same thing," Joe Fisher said. "What about you?"

I flipped my helmet off, exposing my chrome dome once again to the tropical sun. They all broke out laughing. I enjoyed it when the men laughed along with me. In this instance they seemed to get too much malicious pleasure from my appearance. It made me wonder exactly how ugly I looked.

I was sitting on the side of the bunker an hour later when the captain and first sergeant stopped by again. Bobby and I had stretched our ponchos out to make overhead shade. There was enough wind to keep it from being unbearable. All the men from First Platoon had returned to their bunkers. They mostly sat around outside, smoking weed or just bullshitting. Some were catching ZZZZs. Later they would be raring to go, and then things would get interesting.

The driver stopped on the road opposite the bunker, and Captain Carlson and First Sergeant Heard got out and began walking toward the bunker. I started to get up and call the men to attention.

"At ease, Sergeant Merrins," Captain Carlson said.

All the squad leaders were present, and they sat up with interest. They were all probably wondering if they were in trouble for this morning's caper. Surely we would not get away without some form of punishment.

"Make room," Top said. Both he and the captain crawled under the poncho and sat down amongst us.

"The battalion commander thought the shaved head trick was appropriate for the situation. He is wondering if there are any more planned demonstrations." The captain was looking at me when he spoke.

"Not that I know of, Sir," I said.

"Whose idea was it to shave your heads?"

"It was that fucking Lonely, Sir," Dan Kirby said, smiling. "Of course, I wasn't here. I'm just quoting Sergeant Merrins, Sir."

"Okay. What's done is done. The battalion commander is just interested in there being no body count to report to Brigade Headquarters in the morning. I think what the base CO did today was horse shit, but I do not want any further trouble. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir" I replied.

Top just sat there with a smile on his face.

"You think this is over, Top?" the Captain asked.

"Not likely, Sir. Lou. You spread the word. No one gets injured."

"Sure, Top. I think the men all know that. No one's out to hurt anyone. They just get tired of being the low man on the totem pole. Three months in the field without a break is too fucking long. Then they finally get to the rear, and some leg general starts fucking with them. I don't know what is going to happen, but I don't think it is over with either."

"We put our heads together and came up with some plans to help minimize the problems," Top said.

"Yes. As a matter of fact that is the real reason Top and I stopped by. The first thing is that we would prefer that the men stay on the perimeter bunkers and not wander around the base. Especially now that they have shaved heads." The captain could see the hurt look on some of the guys' faces.

"Hear me out before you get too pissed," he said. "If the men mix with these rear echelon troops, someone is bound to mention their haircuts. I know the men well enough to know that they will not put up with any shit from the REMFs, and someone is going to get hurt. The men are mostly interested in drinking beer, getting good food, getting some things from the PX, and maybe seeing a movie. Battalion has decided to take care of all those things."

"What about women, Sir?" Joe Fisher asked.

The captain's face turned red. "I thought you took care of that this morning, Sergeant Fisher."

"I did, Sir, but it's not exactly something I can share with the other men, Sir. They'll be interested in hearing about my exploits, but somehow I don't think that is going to meet their needs."

Top saved the captain further embarrassment. "It is my understanding that sometimes women from the nearby village visit the perimeter fence during the night. I also understand that they are quite agile, and it is rumored that sometimes they actually get inside the wire. Of course that is not official, but there are rumors to that effect."

It was such an Army way of resolving the problem that I laughed.

"Something funny, Sergeant Merrins?" the captain asked.

I just shook my head, no. The French Army that occupied Vietnam had brothels for its soldiers. The American military would not acknowledge the needs of its soldiers, and instead they were willing to accept a security breach of a major fire support base. In this way it met the needs of its men without acknowledging the fact that eighteen and nineteen year olds need to get fucked periodically just to maintain their identity. Most of the men who usually manned these bunkers at night were REMFs and could therefore get all the pussy they wanted any day of the week in town. They had to be goddamn idiots to allow local woman access through the wire. All it meant to me was that old Charlie knew the base's defenses way better than he should. Some night it would not be women at the wire. Tonight anyone coming through the wire would be thoroughly searched, and our men would be alerted to the dangers.

"Anyway," the captain continued, "you can tell the men we have plans to meet their needs. There will be trucks pulling up alongside the road at regular intervals starting at 1600 hours. They will take the men to the base PX and give them rides back until 1800 hours. The base commander has decided to make the PX available to only our personnel during that time period."

"Battalion will be setting up field kitchens in a clearing on the other side of the road," the captain said, pointing in the general direction. "Dinner will be served between 1800 and 2000 hours. The menu will include steaks and barbecue. All you can eat."

"In the next hour a work detail will stop by with beer for the men. They will be in trash cans filled with ice. There is no limit on the amount of beer available. Of course there will also be cold soda available for the men who do not drink alcohol."

"Starting at 2100 hours there will be a movie shown in the same area the mess tents will be located. It will be shown twice, so all the men will have a chance to attend. How does that sound?"

"Great." I said. It was Battalion's way of trying to buy off any more trouble. These things should have been provided from the very beginning, but it had taken a show of spirit before the Battalion Headquarters had gotten its shit together. I did not care, just as long as the men were given some relief from the life they led. All the other men were now smiling and shaking their heads, yes.

"Good," the captain said as he began extricating himself from under the poncho. He stood up, stretched his legs, and wiped the dust from his ass. "Sergeant Merrins, I need to talk to you alone for a minute."

I followed the captain around to the front of the bunker, where we were alone.

"Lou," he said and then stopped. I could tell he was uncomfortable about something. There was nothing to do but wait until he spit it out. It probably was something about stealing his jeep, some kind of punishment.

"The battalion commander is giving a dinner for all the officers this evening. I asked him about you, but he said no. Officers only. I am willing to insist you be invited, but I wanted to check with you first."

I smiled. "Did you mention my name, Sir?"

"Yes."

"Considering the problems I've had with Major Brown, it does not surprise me that the colonel would not want me present. After this morning's escapade it might be wiser for me to remain out of sight."

"Yeah. I agree with that, but I don't want you to feel slighted. Of all my officers, you are the best. As a matter of fact, I have purposely kept them at Battalion with me instead of down here on the perimeter. I wanted the men to relax without any officers present to ruin their day off. All the other platoon sergeants are also spending the night back at Battalion. It sort of slipped my mind that you were not among them until you drove up in my jeep."

"Sorry about the jeep, Sir. It was either yours or the Major's."

He smiled. "It took me a while to figure that one out. Anyway, if you want to stay down here with the men it's all right with me."

"Thank you, Sir," I replied. "Just don't think I have any control over what may happen tonight. The men were insulted today. I have no idea what plans they are making. I suspect I'll be the last to know. The plans Battalion has laid out for the rest of the day should help. If I stay, it will be as a member of the First Platoon, not as its platoon leader."

"I understand, Lou. I really envy your position. The men always get uptight when I'm around. Even the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants feel the separation between themselves and their men. You seem completely at ease with the men, but more importantly, they seem completely at ease with you. Why is that?"

"I don't know, Sir. Maybe it's because I respect them as much as they will ever respect me. My men know that, or at least I think they do. I am no different than they are; I just have a different job than they do. They certainly make me look a lot better at my job than I really am. The truth is, they make more decisions about how the platoon functions than I do."

"The fact that you have the ability to let them is what makes you a good leader, Lou. I'm glad you are okay about tonight. Sometimes the military mind just drives me crazy. You do an officer's job but get neither the pay nor privileges. At some point in the near future, the platoon will get a platoon leader who will have neither your experience nor the respect of the men. I actually feel sorry for the poor bastard. You have a nice night, and I'll see you back at Battalion at 0800 hours tomorrow morning." The captain turned and walked away.

I climbed up on top of the bunker and sat down. My towel was draped over my head for shade and to protect it from the sun. It was over a hundred degrees, but there was a nice breeze blowing. Lighting up a cigarette, I sat there surveying the ground out in front of the bunker. Hailey sat down beside me.

"I'm glad you decided to stay around," he said.

"What?"

"I said, I'm glad you decided to stay around. Don't look so surprised, Sarge. I was inside the bunker napping when you and Carlson woke me up. Heard everything. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

I laughed. "It never even crossed my mind that you would. I just have to learn to be more careful about where I talk to someone in private. You hear the plans for the company for tonight?"

"Yeah. If you don't want me to spread the word to the other men, it's already too late."

"What you do, call them on the radio?"

"Nah. The squad leaders already went off to tell the men. Like you told the captain, they can run things quite well without you."

"PFC Hailey."

"Yes, Sarge."

"Fuck you."

"Thank you, Sergeant Merrins. Another quote for my diary. I want to go to the PX. You want to go first?"

"Shit, I forgot. I don't have any money."

"Not to worry, Sarge. I got plenty."

"Well then pick me up some real chocolate if they have any. I'll watch the radio. Not real interested in visiting the PX myself."

Hailey stood to leave.

"Hey man, stand right there."

"Why?"

"Shade."

"Fuck you, Sarge" he laughed as he left.

A reply formed in my mind, but he was gone before I could get it out. Hailey was a good man to have around. We made a good team, and he was easy to be around.

The day went much as the captain had laid it out. The beer and soda showed up as scheduled. Staff Sergeant Scott had also sent out boxes of candy. He knew the men would be smoking pot and getting the munchies.

The company clerk showed up with mail a day early. Normally we only received mail on resupply day, which was still a day off. It's funny how the mind works. I knew the mail had been accumulating for the past two days, but since it wasn't a resupply day, it never even crossed my mind that since we were in the rear we would get our mail early. Guys stationed in the rear of course had mail call daily.

I took a short nap and when I woke up, Hailey had returned with some candy bars from the PX. Of course they were all mushy since normal chocolate could not take the daily temperatures of the Nam. It was the reason the military provided men with chocolate in the form of Gorilla bars. Milk chocolate that not only wouldn't melt in your mouth, but also would not melt in the face of a nuclear warhead. I immediately put the candy bars in the trash can that was filled with beer and ice water. Five minutes later I enjoyed my treat.

At about 1700 hours I began visiting all the bunkers to check in with the men. Each day I would make sure to touch base with all the men in the platoon. Usually it was for no more than a *Hi, How are you?* Type conversation. Sometimes it turned into something more.

"Tex" Boyd was sitting by himself on top of the bunker, his weapon laying across his lap. He was smoking a cigarette and looking out over the land in front of him. A letter lay by his side, open.

"Hey Tex. How's it going?"

"Okay, Sarge" he said, first looking up at me and then looking around the area.

"Where's everyone?"

"Mostly gone to the PX, I guess. The Hare is off visiting with Buddy. I'm just taking a watch on the bunker."

"Want me to get you something?"

"A beer all right?"

"Sure." I returned a minute later with a Miller and handed it to Tex.

"Thanks, Sarge."

"No sweat."

"You drinking?"

"Nah. Did my drinking earlier today. Think I better lay off for a while now, at least until I get some real food in my stomach."

"You got some time to talk?"

"Sure" I said sitting next to him on the bunker. It was one thing I always had time for. I lit up and got comfortable, laying my weapon down next to me.

"I got a letter from home," Tex said.

"How's everyone?"

"Great. Everything's great." There was a hesitation before he went on. "Sarge, you seem to get along with everyone. You think we are all the same?"

"No. I think we are all different Tex. You and me certainly are in many ways."

"I don't mean like you and me, Sarge. You know. Like us and them."

"Them? You mean Charlie?"

Again Tex looked around scanning the area. "No, Sarge. Niggers. My daddy wrote that letter" he said, pointing at his mail. "I love my dad. Bought us up right. He's a good, God-fearing man. Talks straight at you, lets you know where you stand. I always respected him and have always wanted to be just like him."

In his letter today he asked how Hare is doing. Wants to meet him once we go home. I often write about the men in the squad, and now my family sends extra cookies and stuff to share with the other men. Dad also wanted to know if there were any niggers in my Company. He served in World War two and there weren't any niggers allowed to serve in combat.

"Hell, Sarge. He thinks all the guys are white. It's my fault. I never thought to tell him different. He raised me believing niggers weren't much better than cattle and even more worthless. Same with Mexicans and Indians. White folk are smarter and God-fearing. Niggers got strange ways and believe in devil worship and Voodoo shit. Now he wants me to bring my friends home after the war. Would you believe it?"

I just kept my mouth shut, waiting to see if Tex was done.

"Never had no colored friends growing up. They went to a different school, lived in the poor section of town. I trained with some in basic training and advanced infantry, but figured once I went Airborne it would be all white guys. Everyone knows niggers can't fight, not like us southerners. Instead, half the guys in my jump class was niggers. My bunkmate was some big, black buck from Chicago name Carl. First nigger I really spent any time talking to.

"Turns out he's a Baptist, just like me. Knows the bible as well as I do. We went to Sunday services together, sang the same songs. He was smart too. Finished high school, plans to go to college after he gets out of service.

"Sometimes, when the training got really tough, and it would have been easier to quit than to go on, old Carl would just smile and say "Let's go, Whiteboy." Just like that. Calling me Whiteboy and smiling. And instead of getting mad or feeling insulted, I'd just smile back and keep on going.

"Me and Carl made it together. I could have made it without him and he could have made it without me, but somehow, when it was all over, I realized that Carl made it a whole lot easier and a whole lot more fun. After it was over, I promised to write, and we parted as friends. I figured Carl was different than other niggers. What my daddy always said this was a "good nigger." My daddy knew several good niggers in his day and would not hesitate to point them out when he saw them.

"I come here right from Benning. They put me with Hare the first day. Shit, Sarge. I'd be dead that first week if it weren't for Hare. Taught me what I needed to do and how to do it. Been that way ever since. Don't tell him, but when he is out on point with Buddy, I actually wish he were back with me. I mean, we're close."

"That's good," I said, finally having something to comment on.

"Anyway, I figured Hare was another good nigger. Well now, over time, I come to realize that I like almost all the niggers in the company. They are all different from each other, but when you get right down to it, they seem just like you and me, Sarge. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah."

"What you think, Sarge? They any different from us?"

"They certainly are darker than us," I said laughing. "Some of them are stupider than a horse, but most of them are just as smart as any of us. Me, I never got to the differences. I guess to me they are just like everyone else. Before I got into service, I never had any colored friends. I know a lot of white guys who ain't got half the balls of any man in this company. Wouldn't trade any of them for Hare or any other man in the platoon. If I could only save one, they sure as shit would have to kiss their ass goodbye." Tex smiled at this.

"I don't blame your dad for the way he feels. It was how he was brought up. Don't blame you for being confused about colored folk. You was raised to believe one thing and now have to face reality. To me, it seems you are doing a good job of that. We are all different, and yet, in this outfit we are more like each other than most twins. It goes back to Darwin's theory of natural selection."

"You mean the Monkey man?" Tex asked.

"Yeah, the Monkey man. Basically Darwin says all men evolved from the same species. It is a couple of his theories that apply to our particular situation. Natural selection and survival of the fittest.

"Every man in this Company came to be here by means of natural selection. We all volunteered for combat during a war. Think about that, Tex. It doesn't matter what our backgrounds were or the color of our skin. Somehow, each one of us chose to be here. Fucking amazing. No one made us, it is what each of us chose. Let me ask you this, would you have joined the Army if there had been no war?"

"No," Tex answered without hesitation.

"Neither would I, nor Hare, nor Burns or Joe Fisher, and certainly not Bobby. I don't know what I would be doing, but I'm sure it would not have involved the military, and I sure as hell wouldn't have jumped from airplanes.

"Somehow, the war brought us all together. We are a different breed of man from most people. The guys in this outfit do shit that is guaranteed to get you dead at a very early age. Tomorrow or the next day or the day after that, our ass will be neck deep in shit. You know it and I know it, and yet we won't hesitate going forward. Maybe that makes us the dumbest fucks ever born, but it certainly makes us a breed apart.

“You like Hare and the other niggers because without a mirror to tell you different, when you look at them, you see yourself. You've learned to judge the man instead of his genetic makeup. It makes you different from your father, but if I were you, I would not be too hard on the guy. You are what you were raised up to believe, unless something really momentous happens that makes you look closely at those beliefs. Vietnam has made you confront your feeling about colored people in a way West Texas never would. Hare, Burns, Clay, and all the other men are real people who are more like you than the people you grew up with. They are not "good" niggers. They are just people.

“I and you know more bad white people than we will ever know bad colored people. In our society, back home, all our acquaintances are white, therefore all the people who have ever mistreated or abused us are white. I never could understand how people could choose to hate others who were not causing them any grief and side with people who are at times their biggest problem.”

Tex had started to smile. "Yeah. I love horses. Always have, probably always will. I done been bit, kicked, stomped, thrown, crushed and damn near killed by the stupid fuckers, but I still love being around them. Colored folks never done anything to me like that. It seems that maybe I need to begin liking niggers more and horses less."

"It doesn't come down to choosing, Tex. Take them as they come. Not all colored folks are like the guys in the company. Ain't even many humans like us. I judge each person one at a time. Most people measure up to my expectations without any difficulty. Those who don't are free to go their own way."

"Yeah," Tex replied. "What about the survival of the fittest?"

"Circumstances have placed our butts into a very serious situation, but having arrived to where we are today, we have the ability to survive where others can't." I pointed out beyond the wire. "That's Charlie's country. Or it used to be anyway. When the company first went out into the jungle it was Charlie's home, his playground. It isn't anymore. Now it's our home, our playground."

"You're right, Sarge. I feel the same way. It feels funny sitting here on top of a bunker, instead of against some tree out there. Here I feel like a target waiting for something to hit. Out there I feel like I make the rules.

“When I come to this outfit I was scared. Only part of that was Charlie. Mostly I was scared of the men in the company. I mean, from talking to the men in the rear, you guys were painted as hardcore motherfuckers, killers. Then when I met you all, my first impression was that the guys in the rear didn't know the half of it.

"It was spooky being around you guys. I thought I was well trained and ready for the field. Shit, I wasn't half as tough as Bobby, and he weighs maybe half of what I do. That first week nearly killed me, and it would have been a pleasure to die, I was so tired. I never hurt physically like that before and hope I never have to again. It was like a wide awake nightmare. If not for the Doc and Hare, I sure as hell wouldn't have made it.

"Then you come to the field and hump the boonies like you never missed a day. All the guys who didn't know you were just waiting for you to collapse. I don't know how you did that."

"Shit, Tex. It was as hard on me as it was on you, I just knew what to expect, so it didn't surprise me is all."

"Well you could have fooled me, and I guess you did. Anyway, the physical part was the easy part. Adjusting to being around the other men was the hardest part. It was like being around men from another planet at first."

I just sat there letting Tex talk, while my eyes scanned the scenery to our front.

"Just the way the men always had their weapons with them. Hare would go for hours without putting his rifle down. You ever notice that Sarge?"

"Sure."

"Don't you think that is at least a bit strange?"

"I'm sure I would have at some time in the past, but frankly I guess I got used to it."

"Same here. But at first it made me nervous, until I realized that it was just something everyone does. Another thing that I had to get used to was the way everyone keeps scanning the area around them. Not just sometimes, but all the time. Just like you are doing now, just like I am doing. A guy reading a letter looks up every five seconds or so to scan the area. Now that's spooky. I mean just watch them sometime."

"That's all I ever do Tex," I said smiling.

"You ever notice how the men never turn their back to the jungle when we are in a perimeter. I mean never."

"Sure."

"How the men move their heads continuously when they move? I mean I was raised hunting. Rabbit, squirrel, deer, turkey, you name it, if it was legal, me and Pa hunted it. I really thought I knew how to move through the woods. Then I watch these guys move. Shit, with eighty pounds strapped to their backs, they moved better than we ever did. All the time moving their heads.

I was told in training that in past wars, most of the men never fired their weapons. The first time we hit Charlie I was scared silly. I laid behind a log with my head down, just sort of praying the noise would stop. I probably would have just laid there until the fighting was over, one way or the other, until I looked over at Hare. He was down behind a tree just blasting away to his front. I looked over at Sergeant Fry. He threw a grenade and ducked behind a tree. The damn thing went off maybe ten yards in front of his position. The explosion scared the shit out of me. Bobby looked over at me, smiling. Sarge, you ever seen Bobby during a firefight?"

"Yeah. I know what you mean."

"Sucker's crazy. Smiling like it were a game or something. Anyway, I got all embarrassed laying there doing nothing. Once I got started though, it was like someone else had taken over my body. Used up ten clip of ammo in about ten seconds it seemed like. After it was all over I shook for an hour. Bobby and Hare both told me how good I did. I felt a lot better after that, like I was one of the guys."

"Tex, you're as good as any man in the platoon," I said, meaning it with all sincerity.

"Thanks, Sarge. It means a lot coming from you."

I smiled at that and did not say anything more. For Tex to feel good about my telling him the truth was a compliment. It always amazed me that the men assumed I had some sort of special wisdom to dispense. My approval meant nothing in terms of reality, and yet the men seemed pleased when I gave it.

"Anyway, I got over being scared. I now realize that these guys are just like other people. Most of them are honest, hard-working guys. They are just doing their job. They're no more cold-blooded killers than the average person I have known. I respect them more. You feel that way, Sarge?"

"No." I replied.

"Huh?"

"Tex, don't take me wrong, but you're even crazier than most of us," I said smiling. "What we are and what we do has nothing to do with the average person. Do these guys sometimes scare me? Fucking A". Are they cold blooded killers? Who gives a shit as long as they pull the trigger when it's time to? Don't try to fool yourself. We have as much to do with the average guy as a dinosaur has to do with tits. Just because you and them are alike doesn't make you normal by the rest of the world's standards."

Tex looked like he had been slapped.

"Tex, this is not the real world. Right here, right now, is not real. When you get home, that's the real world. Then you will have to do everything you can to forget this world, although I suspect that

what we are doing will haunt us for the rest of our lives. Just be glad you ain't normal. It's your only chance of survival. Of course, I could be wrong."

I was sincere in expressing my views and could only hope what I said didn't bother Tex too much.

"Bobby thinks you are one crazy motherfucker, Sarge." Tex said.

"Well that's okay, because Sergeant Fry is one crazy motherfucker," I replied.

"Well yeah, he is, but he isn't as crazy as Hare."

"Hare is only crazy until you look at Buddy," I said.

"Buddy ain't crazy," Tex replied, "least not when standing next to Lonely"

"That fucking Lonely is crazy, course he fits right in with everyone else." By now we were both smiling. Shucking and jiving each other like a couple of home boy niggers. Differences disappeared within the group over a period of time. Someone listening to any two of us talk would never be able to tell what race we were, although within a short period of time they might begin to wonder about what species we belonged to.

I looked out over the wire to the distant tree line. The day was hot and the sun beat down. I took a final pull on the cigarette, before field stripping it and putting the butt in my pocket. I felt good. It was great sitting there, talking to Tex. It felt right.

After completing my rounds of the platoon I made my way back to the bunker, crawling under the outstretched poncho into the shade. Using my helmet as a pillow, I folded my towel from around my neck into a cushion. Laying on the ground, I got comfortable, closed my eyes, and within seconds was asleep. My mind closed out the activity that continued around the area, and my body enjoyed a deep sleep for the first time in a couple of months.

As always my eyes remained opened, and I was completely alert to my surroundings.

"Yeah, Bobby?" I replied. Although I could not exactly remember his addressing me, some part of my mind had recorded the message, and this response seemed appropriate.

"You going to eat?"

"Yeah," I replied, sitting up.

The sun had moved in the sky. Without looking at my watch I judged the time to be after seven in the evening. I stood, slowly stretching the kinks that had developed during my nap. Somehow I had managed to get over two hours of sleep during the daylight hours. An unprecedented accomplishment, which my body rewarded me for by feeling strong. I was famished.

"Everyone else has already either eaten or left for the mess area, Lou. I got a couple of the guys to babysit our position, so if you are done goofing off for the day, I vote we eat."

"Hell, Bobby. You ain't got a vote, you're in the Army, remember?"

I spotted my other squad leaders heading over the rise that led to the mess area set up by the Battalion. I grabbed my weapon, and Bobby and I set off in pursuit. As we walked past a couple of bunkers, the men manning them shouted greetings and salutations, a couple of which called for a returned one finger salute. It was normal that the men expressed themselves in such a manner. An Airborne tradition of sorts within the platoon and company. The better the men felt, the more obnoxious and disrespectful they became. To someone outside the group their seeming insubordination and contempt would appear to be inappropriate. To us it was just their way of expressing high spirits and feeling good.

On the other hand, the men would not act this way toward officers or, in all probability, toward the other platoon sergeants. I occupied a rather unique position within the company. Having the platoon leader's position but not being an officer was different. Put that with the fact that I was the youngest and had the least rank of all the other platoon sergeants, and I was indeed different. The guys in the platoon who had known me when I was a private serving alongside them treated me with respect, while maintaining a closeness reserved for men of common origins. To them I was a line doggy, a grunt, as opposed to an officer or a lifer. My reputation was in a large part secured from their perspective of me. This attitude was passed down from them to the newer men in the platoon, who had not known me until I showed up in the field for a second time, two months previously.

The dinner was exceptional. Not the cuisine, but the ambiance. The food was really nothing for someone who routinely worked in the rear, but it was a treat of sorts for the rest of us. The steaks were served right from the grill, individually prepared by cooks, right on the spot and to order. There were fresh vegetables and fruits. Most of the men opted for milk to drink with their meal. Real milk. The thing wet dreams were made of by men who lived in the jungle.

It wasn't that we did not get fed real food every three days. The biggest difference was that it was all fresh. Out in the field, the steaks were cooked and stored in big containers for several hours before being served. The same with the veggies and fruit. There was milk, but it was the powdered kind that tasted like chalk. I was starved.

The Battalion had set up tables under stretched tarpaulin to provide shade. Since it was evening, the day was beginning to cool down into the nineties. After passing through the food line and exiting with two plates of food, I followed Bobby to a table.

Everyone at the table was from the original company, and there were only about forty of us left. Of course some of the guys had already eaten and left, but there were still about fifteen sitting at one large table. It was great seeing them all together again.

You would think that being in the field together every day would make this occasion not special, but there were tremendous differences.

The first thing that struck me was the noise. In the field, noise was the antithesis of life. To make noise was to draw attention. To draw attention might mean to draw death. Here everyone was talking loudly, trying to make themselves heard above the din. What would have been a quiet chuckle or even a silent grin in the field was a full belly laugh in the tent. It sounded strange at first, this cacophony. Functioning in the jungle tended to make one quieter than a monk in cloisters. To be relieved of that burden felt great. The atmosphere was jubilant, the various conversations loud and boisterous. Judging from the tone, there was no morale problem in this particular group of fighting men.

The appearance of the men struck me. I don't just mean the fact that everyone was bald, although that was enough to give me pause. No. It was seeing the men in clean uniforms and cleanly shaven. They looked so young. Of course they were, most of them not much older than eighteen. At twenty one, almost twenty-two, I was the oldest guy at the table. I knew that for a fact. It was just that out in the bush, I never saw the men as being young. Especially these guys.

I had now known these men for over a year, both in peacetime training and in the midst of combat. Sitting in the shade of the tent, it was easy to picture them the way they had been. Looking at them sitting there, it was easy to imagine them as elite airborne soldiers in training. The only difference besides the hair was that each of them now had a weapon not only with them, but in some way touching their body. Here was an old habit, and it reminded me of my conversation with Tex. Just ordinary guys, right?

In the field one did not see the youth. It was gone. Camouflaged as well as any gook spider hole. There, but hidden by the jungle from prying eyes. I had missed that youthfulness, and I had not realized it until now.

Combat turns boys into men. I had heard that statement before but had not really understood what it was trying to convey. Combat extinguishes one's youth. It steals that precious time in a person's life and teaches them all the harshest realities in a very short time span. Maybe the lessons become valuable later in life, but only if one lives long enough to utilize them. Of one hundred and sixty plus

men who had shipped over with the company some eight months before, there were now less than twenty-five percent still around. Quite a lesson, huh?

But the field did not just teach harsh lessons. If you paid attention, it taught valuable lessons about yourself and others. The men sitting around eating were much more about living than dying. These men had taught me everything: loyalty, courage, friendship, love, trust, and any other positive value you could think up to assign to other members of the human race.

The gathering of these men together into one space, even for the short time the meal lasted, was a miracle. I knew that the chances of it ever happening again were non-existent. I savored every moment of it. Every scent, every taste, every sound was recorded within my brain. There was never a better meal.

At about 2100 that night, I found myself down by the barbed wire fence letting young Vietnamese ladies enter the perimeter. Bobby and Sergeant Baskins were with me, and there was a manned machine gun covering the wire from the closest bunker.

The young Vietnamese women approached the wire confidently, moving easily through the minefield. It was evidently a nightly journey for some of them. I had no idea how they were normally greeted, but the presence of bald headed, armed combat troops made them decidedly nervous. I had been chosen to be the one to search them, my fellow sergeants deferring to the wisdom and experience bestowed on me by my advanced age. Of course, I had no experience at it.

I quickly ran my hands over the body of each woman. The experience was far from pleasant for me, although I tried not to show it. The women seemed less insulted by it than I did. I tried not to be too aggressive in my search, looking only for large weapons, like hand grenades, knives, and AK-47s. The men with whom the young ladies visited would be responsible for a more thorough and natural body search.

Bobby and Fred did not fuck around, staying alert. Their weapons were trained continuously on the women, their fingers on the triggers. For us it was a harrowing experience. Night time was always dangerous in the field. We were by nature hunters and still had the instincts of the hunted. Our wariness was transmitted to the women. You could see it in their eyes.

About twenty women passed through the wire that night. As each passed inspection, they were handed over to one of the men to be escorted to the various bunkers occupied by the company. How many men chose to participate in the evening's festivities was not my concern. I chose not to know.

My hope was that the men would not catch some strain of venereal disease that could not be treated. There was a rumor going around that there was one form that was not treatable by antibiotics,

and that men who got infected were shipped off to a special camp located somewhere in the Philippines. They would stay there until the military developed a treatment. It might be years.

That particular rumor was responsible for many a man hesitating for as many as ten seconds before engaging in sex. Not really. Those who chose to have sex when it was available had made up their minds about such matters long before. I knew some of the men were faithful to their wives, lovers, or religious beliefs. Within the outfit they were probably in a minority, but I was never interested enough to do a survey. I did not make an issue of my practices, lying like a bandit whenever the subject came up.

My only concern tonight was to get the women in and back out safely. I warned each man sent to escort their particular choice that they had two hours in which to take care of their business. The women were to be sent back outside the perimeter by 2300 hours. This was plenty of time for the men, most of them needing only minutes to take care of their needs.

Everything went smoothly. I was amazed, but by 2330 hours I was back at my bunker settling in for the night. I closed my eyes and actually got some sleep before the night's festivities began.

My first warning that anything was happening was someone shouting, "Fire in the Hole!"

This combat warning signified that an explosion was imminent. I had been laying down next to the bunker, and as soon as the warning was issued I crawled up tight to the side wall, not knowing what to expect. There had been no shots fired, so I was pretty sure we were not being attacked. The platoon's radio was on, and nothing had been transmitted. This indicated there were no problems that Battalion Headquarters were aware of yet.

I was just sticking my head up to look around when the first explosion occurred a couple of hundred meters up the perimeter fence. Night turned to day as a thunderous fireball blossomed into the sky in front of one of the bunkers. Even as the light began to dim, a second warning of "Fire in the Hole" rang out. Sure enough, ten seconds later, another fireball, followed immediately by a second, blossomed in front of another bunker.

The first explosion had startled me. The warning meant the men in the company were the ones setting off the fireworks. As the second explosions occurred, my mind registered what was taking place. This dawning coincided with every weapon in Third Platoon letting loose. Streams of M-60 ammo lit the night. Claymores exploded, and twenty or more M-16s added to the din.

By now I was standing on top of the bunker watching the display. Third Platoon's bunkers lit up the night as they fired off the rest of their trash cans, the fifty five gallon drums of napalm dug into the ground in front of each bunker. These were supposed to represent the last line of defense for the

perimeter in case of an enemy attack. The guys in Third Platoon were using them for a fireworks display.

By now the rest of the men in the platoon were standing around admiring the show. It was really quite spectacular. Third Platoon was doing it right, adding in smoke grenades to augment the confusion. The din was frightening, and I was sure the neighborhood would soon be awake in wonderment. We were standing around laughing and applauding when we heard the first mortars leaving the tubes. Next thing, everyone was hitting the dirt as the mortars sent forth another volley.

The weapons platoon was of course prepared for this demonstration, otherwise they never could have responded quite this quickly in support of Third Platoon. The second volley was out of the tubes before the first group of four rounds hit the ground a hundred meters outside the perimeter. Confusion began to reign. The explosions shook the ground and sent concussive waves back toward the perimeter. The second volley included two flares that lit up the night.

By now we were all inside our bunkers. Even though we knew there was no attack taking place, once the mortars started passing overhead, it was time to seek shelter. "Short rounds" were a fact of life: Not all rounds achieved their desired altitude and distance. Better safe than sorry.

As quickly as everything started, it stopped. The whole episode had lasted less than five minutes, but of course this was only the opening act. The silence close to our positions was total, but in the distance you could hear the rest of the fire base gearing up for the enemy attack. Sirens started going off. Helicopter motors could be heard revving up. Now flares started going off around the whole perimeter as everyone began to respond to the action.

Bobby, who was standing next to me at one of the firing ports, held up his arm into the light filtering through to look at the time.

"What's going on, Bobby?" I whispered.

"Nothing really, Sarge. Just waking up the legs to the fact that we are around. I need to borrow the radio for a while." I did not argue. Bobby was evidently coordinating First Platoon's efforts and so was in more need of it than I was. I took out a cigarette and lit up. It was going to be a long night if these guys were seeking revenge for today's tribulations.

"Fire in the Hole!" It was Second Platoon's turn. Again the explosions to start the simulated attack, followed by a mass outpouring of affectation by the men. I started laughing out loud. If this were real it would be deadly serious, and nobody would be laughing. It just felt good to see the men enjoying themselves. The rest of the men in the bunker were smiling. They were laying out ammo in preparation

for their turn. Evidently they were aware of some time schedule that I was not privy to. Suddenly there was an explosion out in front of the perimeter that signaled an escalation in response.

To an untrained ear it would have sounded like a dud artillery shell. A dull thud instead of a clap of thunder. My eyes quickly located the drifting smoke of the marking round. It was not the weapons squad that was going to provide support for this scenario. Sure enough, twenty seconds later the first barrage of artillery shells began landing in the distant tree line surrounding the fire support base. Someone had contacted Battalion Artillery and had convinced them this was the real thing.

Whoever it was coordinating tonight's actions knew his stuff, because soon there was all types of artillery going off in front of us. It was beginning to look like the start of World War Three. This time the commotion took a lot longer to stop since it was not only the company that was involved.

I was sure everyone outside the area was going nuts trying to figure if the base was being overrun. Everything to the company's front was a mass of confusion. With all the explosions and pyrotechnics, no one could make any sense of what was happening, even with the night having been vanquished by all the flares popping open overhead. It took twenty minutes for things to calm down.

I left the bunker for a look around. Luckily for us the smoke was drifting slowly away from the perimeter. Still, the stench of exploded napalm and cordite was distinctive. I could hear the sound of helicopters overhead and tracked vehicles moving along the perimeter road. The night was beginning to cool down. There were no clouds in the sky except for the one created by the artillery that was beginning to drift off.

I noted one thing that seemed strange. Our sector of the perimeter was now quiet, but the rumble of artillery echoed elsewhere around the perimeter. There was distant small arms firing. There were helicopters overhead but they did not appear to be interested in only this area.

Hailey and Sergeant Fry were squatting down by the radio. I walked over. Hailey saw me approach, and suddenly the noise of the radio ceased.

"Damn radio's down, Sergeant!" Hailey said, looking up at me.

"Fucking radio never works when you need it. Hear anything interesting before it broke?"

"Seems to be a general attack taking place," Bobby replied. A couple of guys standing nearby laughed.

"Damn gooks." It was Sergeant Kirby talking now. "Our first night in a perimeter and they attack the damn base. Keeping us awake and everything. From the sound of it, the REMFs are getting hit hard. I only hope they don't get overrun."

I laughed.

I walked back to where I had been sleeping before this had all started. There were some sodas left from earlier. I got one and opened it. Bobby drifted over and sat next to me.

Bobby and I had the ability to sit quietly for hours without speaking if there was nothing to say. We just sat there quietly and enjoyed the light and sound show the legs were putting on for us. It crossed my mind that by morning all this would be nothing but confusion. No one would know exactly when or where the commotion started.

I had gone back to sleep, and it was Bobby who woke me.

The night was dark and quiet; the way God meant it to be. "It's time, Lou."

"Time, Bobby?"

"Yeah. Act Three."

I got up and stretched. Now I was awake. The nap had refreshed me and I was aware of the other men entering the bunker. I joined them.

"Two minutes," Bobby said to no one in particular.

Bolts slid back and then forward, chambering shells. The familiar snick as the M-79 closed on its chamber. I moved over to a firing port and took up my position. It was evident that we were about to be attacked. Luckily we were prepared.

"Fire in the Hole." Sergeant Fisher's deep voice warned those within a thousand yards of the bunker. I closed my eyes and ducked below the firing port as the men set off the "trash cans" in front of our position.

I shot off fifteen clips of M-16 ammo in the next five minutes. The noise inside the bunker was deafening. The flash from the rifle barrel blinding. Twice during that period, hot casings from someone's rifle found their way down the back of my collar, burning me. The smoke quickly built up in the enclosed space, causing me to cough and making my eyes water. By time the order to cease fire was given, I was nauseated and only wanted to get out of the bunker.

Outside, the noise of the artillery barrage was once again present. Inside I had not even noticed when the artillery had again joined the battle. There were flares overhead. For the life of me, I could not remember if they were there before we left the bunker or not. My ears were aching and ringing at the same time.

It was my first experience at fighting from a closed bunker like that, and I could only hope it was my last. This was a large, well-built bunker. Eight of us could fight from it at the same time without it seeming crowded, at least that had been my feeling before our exhibition. The noise, light, smoke, and

confusion had changed my mind about that. Give me a firefight out in the open, laying behind or around a tree, over occupying a bunker anytime.

The scene outside was surrealistic. The thunder of the artillery barrage continued along a wide front. Far off to the left I could see a second cloud of smoke drifting away. It was easy to figure what had happened. Fourth Platoon had set off its defensive display at the same time we had. It must have been a hell of a show and had convinced everyone another attack was occurring. While we had stopped our participation, the artillery was going full blast. There were helicopters up circling overhead, giving the artillery plenty of room to operate. Didn't they notice there were no incoming rounds or explosions within the perimeter? No green tracers in response to our red ones? Fucking REMFs.

Again the battle drifted away from our positions as other sectors engaged. We were done for the night. No one said so, but everyone was breaking down their weapons and cleaning them. One last time I broke down my rifle and cleaned it thoroughly. It was easy enough since flares continued to fill the sky as the helicopters adjusted the artillery onto an enemy that must be as confused as hell.

I wondered if there were gooks laying out there thinking just maybe they had fucked up and given away their position. A lonely sniper waiting for a chance target when the whole American Army decides to fuck with him. It gave my heart a real lift just thinking of it.

It would have been ironic if the NVA had chosen just that instant to attack the base. It would have been a massacre. We still had plenty of ammunition. The wire in front of our positions was still intact, along with the mine field protecting it. Real damage to the perimeter was minimal, although the engineers would be busy setting up trash cans tomorrow. I felt good, and looking at the men sitting around me, I could tell they did too. We were vindicated.

It was 0330 hours before I closed my eyes again to get some sleep. There was still some distant disturbance somewhere on the far side of the base. REMFs fighting ghosts. From prior experience in the rear, I knew false alarms were not unusual. A lot of the bunkers were manned by men without any combat experience. Our being on the perimeter was an anomaly. I wondered what they would report as the body count when the sun rose.

I woke up in the predawn darkness without any prompting. Sitting up slowly I could sense the movement of the other men as they prepared for the coming dawn. Without instruction, we moved into the bunker and took up defensive positions.

The night began to lighten. In the quiet I heard the approach of a vehicle along the perimeter road. It stopped somewhere in back of the bunker and the motor stopped. I left my position and exited the rear of the bunker. There was movement, difficult to evaluate, approaching.

"Halt! Who goes there!" A whispered challenge from off to my right.

"Captain Carlson," the voice replied, equally quietly.

"Condition Yellow."

"Romeo."

"Advance and be recognized."

Captain Carlson and Top advanced to the bunker.

"Your men are on the ball, Sergeant Merrins."

"Yes Sir," I replied.

"Your radio working?"

"No, Sir. Hailey said it went out early last night. We did all right without it but need to get it going before moving out."

"You make sure it's taken care of immediately. What was all the commotion last night?"

"I'm not real sure, Sir. Some REMFs off to our left started shooting and must have called in artillery. Next thing everything got confused. I really never saw any enemy, but for a while there it got scary. You know what I mean, Sir?"

"Yeah, Lou. It gets mighty confusing sometimes."

"I would have contacted Battalion, but with the radio down I felt it better just to hunker down and ride the storm out. After everything had died down, I checked and there were no casualties within the company."

"Well, this wasn't the only area to get hit. For all the firing there seems to be very few bodies this morning. Anyway, I'm glad everyone made it all right. Make sure you get an ammo count so we can get the company resupplied today. We'll begin to get our new weapon's issued starting at 0900. Trucks will begin picking up the men then. Have everyone packed and have them bring everything with them when you leave."

"Yes, Sir."

"You be in that first group out. I need to meet with you as soon as you are done." He turned to go.

"Airborne, Sir!"

He turned and smiled. MSgt. Heard had a smile on his face as they turned and headed back to their jeep. The sun began to peek out from beyond the eastern horizon as they mounted the jeep and moved out.

I sat beside the bunker and lit up a cigarette. Of course they knew exactly what had happened last night. Military bullshit did not allow them to admit it or give their approval. Knowing both men, I knew they would have given anything to be able to participate in last night's events. It was payback for always being on the bottom of the list and being treated like shit. I rubbed my hand over my bald head and smiled.

There was a price to be paid. The captain telling me to have the men pack up before moving out meant the company would not be spending another night on the perimeter. There were only so many trash cans available in this world, and we had used up our issue. Tonight the company would be out in the bush again. To the higher ups, this was to be our punishment for last night. Motherfuckers couldn't even get that straight in their head. I laughed.

"What's so funny, Lou." Bobby said, staring down at me.

"Assholes are shipping us out today, Bobby."

"About time," he said, turning away.

END